

Cuba & Angola

Fighting for Africa's
Freedom and Our Own



FIDEL CASTRO

RAÚL CASTRO

NELSON MANDELA

**The CUBAN FIVE in Angola:
In their own words**

*Including accounts by four generals of
Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces*

INCLUDING

**Accounts by Four Generals
of Cuba's Revolutionary
Armed Forces**

**'Operation Carlota'
by Gabriel García Márquez**

PATHFINDER

New York London Montreal Sydney

"Those not willing to fight for the freedom of others will never be able to fight for their own."

FIDEL CASTRO, JULY 1976

Twenty-five years ago, in March 1988, the army of South Africa's apartheid regime was dealt a crushing defeat by Cuban, Angolan, and Namibian combatants at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in Angola. That triumph, South Africa's future president Nelson Mandela proclaimed, marked "a milestone in the history of the struggle for southern African liberation."

With the victory at Cuito Cuanavale, Angola's sovereignty was secured. Namibia's independence was won. The deepening revolutionary struggle in South Africa received a powerful boost.

And the Cuban Revolution too was strengthened.

Between 1975 and 1991 some 425,000 Cubans volunteered for duty in Angola in response to requests from the Angolan government to help defend the newly independent country against multiple invasions by South Africa's white-supremacist regime, backed by its allies in Washington and elsewhere.

Here this history is told by those who lived it and made it.



ISBN 978-1-60488-046-5



9 781604 880465

US\$12 • £8

PATHFINDER

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COVER DESIGN: TONI GORTON

“CUBA IN ANGOLA: Fighting for Africa's Freedom and Our Own: Fidel Castro, Raul Castro, Nelson Mandela, the Cuban Five in Angola in their own words”

2013, Pathfinder Press, New York

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Why South Africa Loves Cuba

Piero Gleijeses

Piero Gleijeses is a professor of American foreign policy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. All quotes from the above article are drawn from his latest book: Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991, The University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

January 14, 2014

While the American news media recently focused on "the handshake" between President Obama and Raul Castro, it is worth pondering why the organizers of Nelson Mandela's memorial service invited Raul Castro to be one of only six foreign leaders—of the ninety-one in attendance—to speak at the ceremony. Not only was Raul Castro accorded that honor, but he also received by far the warmest introduction: "We now will get an address from a tiny island, an island of people who liberated us ... the people of Cuba," the chairperson of the African National Congress (ANC) said. Such words echo what Mandela himself said when he visited Cuba in 1991: "We come here with a sense of the great debt that is owed the people of Cuba ... What other country can point to a record of greater selflessness than Cuba has displayed in its relations to Africa?"

Many factors led to the demise of apartheid. The white South African government was defeated not just by the power of Mandela, the courage of the South African people, or the worldwide movement to impose sanctions. It was also brought down by the defeat of the South African military in Angola. This explains the prominence of Raul Castro at the memorial service: it was Cuban troops that humiliated the South African army. In the 1970s and 1980s, Cuba changed the course of history in southern Africa despite the best efforts of the United States to prevent it.

In October 1975, the South Africans, encouraged by the Gerald Ford administration, invaded Angola to crush the leftwing Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). They would have succeeded had not 36,000 Cuban soldiers suddenly poured into Angola.

By April 1976, the Cubans had pushed the South Africans out.

As the CIA noted, Castro had not consulted Moscow before sending his troops (as is clear from later tense meetings with the Soviet leadership in the 1980s.) The Cubans, Kissinger confirmed in his memoirs, had confronted the Soviets with a *fait accompli*. Fidel Castro understood that the victory of Pretoria (with Washington in the wings) would have tightened the grip of white domination over the people of southern Africa. It was a defining moment: Castro sent troops to Angola because of his commitment to what he has called "the most beautiful cause," the struggle against apartheid. As Kissinger observed later, Castro "was probably the most genuine revolutionary leader then in power."

The tidal wave unleashed by the Cuban victory in Angola washed over South Africa. "Black Africa is riding the crest of a wave generated by the Cuban success in Angola," noted the *World*, South Africa's major black newspaper. "Black Africa is tasting the heady wine of the possibility of realizing the dream of total liberation." Mandela later recalled hearing about the Cuban victory in Angola while he was incarcerated on Robben Island. "I was in prison when I first heard of the massive aid that the internationalist Cuban troops were giving to the people of Angola. ... We in Africa are accustomed to being the victims of countries that want to grab our territory or subvert our sovereignty. In all the history of Africa this is the only time a foreign people has risen up to defend one of our countries."

Pretoria, however, had not given up: even after retreating from the Cubans, it hoped to topple Angola's MPLA government. Cuban troops remained in Angola to protect it from another South African invasion. Even the CIA conceded that they were "necessary to preserve Angolan independence." In addition, the Cubans trained ANC guerrillas as well as SWAPO rebels, who were fighting for the independence of Namibia from the South Africans who illegally occupied it.

From 1981 to 1987, the South Africans launched bruising invasions of southern Angola. It was a stalemate—until November 1987, when Castro decided to push the South Africans out of the country once and for all. His decision was triggered by the fact that the South African army had cornered the best units of the Angolan army in the southern Angolan town of Cuito Cuanavale. And his decision was made possible by the Iran Contra scandal rocking Washington. Until the Iran-Contra scandal exploded in late 1986, weakening and distracting the Reagan administration, the Cubans had feared that the United States might launch an attack on their homeland. They had therefore been unwilling to deplete their stocks of weapons. But Iran Contra defanged Reagan, and freed Castro to send Cuba's best planes, pilots, and antiaircraft weapons to Angola. His strategy was to break the South African offensive against Cuito Cuanavale in the southeast and then attack in the southwest, "like a boxer who with his left hand blocks the blow and with his right—strikes."

On March 23, 1988, the South Africans launched their last major attack against Cuito Cuanavale. It was an abject failure. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff noted, "The war in Angola has taken a dramatic and—as far as the South Africans are concerned—an undesirable turn."

The Cubans' left hand had blocked the South African blow while their right hand was preparing to strike: powerful Cuban columns were moving towards the Namibian border, pushing the South Africans back. Cuban MIG-23s began to fly over northern Namibia. US and South African documents prove that the Cubans gained the upper hand in Angola. The Cubans demanded that Pretoria withdraw unconditionally from Angola and allow UN-supervised elections in Namibia. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that if South Africa refused, the Cubans were in a position "to launch a well-supported offensive into Namibia." The South Africans acknowledged their dilemma: if they refused the Cuban demands, they ran "the very real risk of becoming involved in a full-scale conventional war with the Cubans, the results of which are potentially disastrous." The South African military was grim: "We must do the utmost to avoid a confrontation."

Pretoria capitulated. It accepted the Cubans' demands and withdrew unconditionally from Angola and agreed to UN supervised elections in Namibia, which SWAPO won.

The Cuban victory reverberated beyond Namibia and Angola. In the words of Nelson Mandela, the Cuban victory "destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressor... [and] inspired the fighting masses of South Africa ... Cuito Cuanavale was the turning point for the liberation of our continent—and of my people—from the scourge of apartheid."

Piero Gleijeses is a professor of American foreign policy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. All quotes from the above article are drawn from his latest book: Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991, The University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Image: Flickr/Marcelo Montecino. CC BY-SA 2.0.

THE CUBAN INTERVENTION IN ANGOLA

(Excerpts from) From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. This page was last modified on 2 April 2011. *(..)* indicates deleted portions on this RD website version – RDA ed.

Full text source: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cuban_intervention ...

In November 1975, on the eve of Angola's independence, Cuba launched a large-scale military intervention in support of the leftist liberation movement MPLA against United States-backed invasions by South Africa and Zaire in support of two other liberation movements competing for power in the country, FNLA and UNITA.[1][2]

Following the retreat of Zaire and South Africa, Cuban forces remained in Angola to support the Angolan government against the UNITA insurgency in the continuing Angolan Civil War. In 1988, Cuban troops intervened a second time to avert a military disaster in a Soviet-led FAPLA offensive against UNITA which was supported by South Africa, leading to the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. This turn of events is considered to have been the major impetus to the success of the ongoing peace talks leading to the New York Accords after which Cuban and South African forces withdrew from Angola while South West Africa gained its independence from South Africa.[3][4][5][6][7] Cuban military engagement in Angola ended in 1991.

In addition to the Cuban military, from 1976 to 1991, 430,000 Cuban foreign aid volunteers served in Angola.[8] At one point, two-thirds of all doctors in Angola were Cuban.[8]

(...)

Foreign interference

(...) According to "the former chief of the CIA's Angola Task Force, John Stockwell, and from various other sources, it is now known that the US, far from seeking peaceful solutions, was instrumental in touching off the final round of fighting in 1975" that led to the Cuban intervention.[12]

Other western countries with their own clandestine support for FNLA and UNITA were Great Britain and France.[32] Israel aided the FNLA from 1963 to 1969 and the FNLA sent members to Israel for training. Through the 1970s Israel shipped arms to the FNLA via Zaire.[33]

Some East bloc countries and Yugoslavia first established ties with the MPLA in the early 1960s during its struggle against the Portuguese. The Soviet Union started modest military aid in the late 1960s. This support remained clandestine, came in trickles and sometimes ceased altogether. This was the case in 1972, when the MPLA came under strong pressure from the Portuguese and was torn apart by internal strife (struggle between MPLA leader António Agostinho Neto and Chipenda from 1972 to 1974). Soviet aid was suspended in 1973 with the exception of a few limited shipments in 1974 to counter Chinese support for the FNLA; only Yugoslavia continued to send supplies to the MPLA.[12][32][34] In response to US and Chinese support for the FNLA, Soviet support

for the MPLA was resumed in March 1975 in the form of arms deliveries by air via Brazzaville and by sea via Dar-es-Salaam.[12][23] Soviet assistance to the MPLA was always somewhat reluctant; they never fully trusted Neto and their relationship was to remain ambivalent through the following years.

The Soviets preferred a political solution, but they did not want to see the MPLA marginalized.[35] Even after the South African incursions the Soviets only sent arms, but no instructors for the use of the sophisticated weapons.[36] Among the other Eastern Bloc countries the MPLA had well established contacts with East Germany and Romania, the former shipping large amounts of non-military supplies.

Although being leftist, Neto was interested in an ideological balance in his foreign support, but in spite of "overtures" well into 1975, he was unable to procure support for the MPLA from the US, thus becoming solely dependent on the eastern camp.[37]

Cuba and the MPLA before the Civil War

Cuba's first informal contacts with the MPLA dated back to the late 1950s. MPLA guerrillas received their first training from Cubans in Algiers starting in 1963 and Guevara met MPLA-leader Agostinho Neto for the first high-level talks on 5 January 1965 in Brazzaville where Cuba was establishing a two-year military mission. This mission had the primary purpose to act as a strategic reserve for the Cuban operation in eastern Congo. It also was to provide assistance to the Alphonse Massemba-Débat government in Brazzaville and, at Neto's request, to the MPLA with its operations against the Portuguese in Cabinda and in northern Angola where its major foe was the FNLA. This co-operation marked the beginning of the Cuban-Angolan alliance which was to last 26 years.[38] The MPLA-Cuban operations in Cabinda and northern Angola were met with very little success and the Cubans ended the mission to Brazzaville as planned in July 1966. The MPLA moved its headquarters to Lusaka in early 1968. A few MPLA guerrillas continued to receive military training in Cuba but else (*further –ed.*) contacts between Cuba and the MPLA cooled as Havana turned its attention to the liberation struggle in Guiné (Guinea-Bissau).[39][40][41] Following Castro's tour of African countries in May 1972 Cuba stepped up its internationalist operations in Africa starting a training mission in Sierra Leone and smaller technical missions in Equatorial Guinea, Somalia, Algeria and Tanzania.

In a memorandum of 22 November 1972 by Cuban Major Manuel Piñeiro Lozada to Major Raúl Castro it says: "For some time now we have discussed the possibility of entering Angola and Mozambique with the objective of getting to know the revolutionary movements in those countries. These movements have been a mystery even for those socialist countries that give them considerable aid. This research would help us give more focused aid to those movements. I don't consider it necessary to delineate the strategic importance of these countries, it takes only pointing out that a change in the course of events of the wars that are developing in both countries could signify a change in all the forces in the African continent. For the first time two independent countries in Africa from which a bigger war could be waged would have common borders with the region with the principle investment and the strongest political-military knot of Imperialism in Africa exist: South Africa, Rhodesia, Zaire, and the Portuguese colonies.

Our comrades in the MPLA solicited us this May for the following: a) That we train 10 men in Cuba in guerrilla warfare (...b) That we send a crew to fly a DC-3 ...(c) They want to send a high level delegation to Cuba ... Both movements will coordinate with the governments of Tanzania and Zambia for safe passage of our comrades through their territories".[42]

These considerations in 1972 bore no fruit and Cuba's attentions remained focused on Guinea-Bissau. It was only after the Portuguese Revolution that an MPLA delegation brought a request for economic aid, military training and arms to Cuba on 26 July 1974. In early October Cuba received another request, this time more urgent, for 5 Cuban military officers to help organize the MPLA army, FAPLA. In December 1974/January 1975 Cuba sent Major Alfonso Perez Morales and Carlos Cadelo on a fact finding mission to Angola to assess the situation.[43] In a letter of 26 January 1975, handed to Cadelo and Morales, Neto listed what the MPLA wanted from Cuba:

"1. The establishment, organization, and maintenance of a military school for cadres. We urgently need to create a company of security personnel, and we need to train military staff. 2. A ship to transport the war materiel that we have in Dar-es-Salaam to Angola. The delivery in Angola, if it were in a Cuban ship, could take place outside of territorial waters. 3. Weapons and transportation for the Rapid Deployment Unit (Brigada de Intervencion) that we are planning to organize, as well as light weapons for some infantry battalions. 4. Transmitters and receivers to resolve communication problems of widely dispersed military units. 5. Uniforms and military equipment for 10,000 men. 6. Two pilots and one flight mechanic. 7. Assistance in training trade union leaders. 8. Assistance in organizing schools to teach Marxism... 9. Publications dealing with political and military subjects, especially instruction manuals. 10. Financial assistance while we are establishing and organizing ourselves." [44]

Although Cuba was considering the establishment of a military mission (military training) in Angola, again there was no official response to this request. It was only reiterated by the MPLA in May 1975 when Cuban commander Flavio Bravo met Neto in Brazzaville while the Portuguese were preparing to withdraw from their African colonies.[45] The MPLA's hopes for aid were turned to the eastern Bloc countries from where not enough help materialised according to their wishes. Neto is quoted in a Cuban report complaining about Moscow's lacklustre support. He also expressed hope that the war in Angola would become "a vital issue in the fight against (*between –ed.*) imperialism and socialism". But neither the USSR nor the MPLA itself expected a major war to break out before independence.[46] In March 1975 the MPLA sent 100 members for training in the Soviet Union and the requested financial assistance (100,000US\$) it received from Yugoslavia.

South Africa intervenes

(...)

The Cuban military mission

Until late August Cuba only had a few technical advisers in Angola, which the CIA took note of [65] Neto had repeatedly requested 100 Cuban instructors but it was only after

careful assessment of the situation that in the end of July 1975 Cuba decided to establish four military training centres, "Centros de Instruccion Revolucionaria" (CIR) in Angola. On 25 July fifty Cuban weapons specialists were sent to Brazzaville in order to help with Soviet arms deliveries for the MPLA.

On 3 August a Cuban delegation traveled a second time to Angola to assess the situation, to draw up plans for the training programme as requested by Neto and to hand over 100,000 US dollars.[66] Neto had complained "of the little amount of aid from socialist countries" and "that the USSR detained (*delayed – ed.*) aid to the MPLA in 1972, even though they told us that they are now helping with arms, but it's very little compared with their vast needs." Arguelles agreed with Neto as he saw the sides in Angola "clearly defined, that the FNLA and UNITA represented the international imperialist forces and the Portuguese reaction, and the MPLA represented the progressive and nationalist forces.[67][68]

After the return of the delegation on 8 August the Cubans considered the options of their instructors in Angola in case of an invasion by South Africa or Zaire which would be either "guerrilla war" or withdrawal to Zambia, where Cuba proceeded to open an embassy.[69] In a memorandum of 11 August 1975 Major Raúl Díaz Argüelles to Major Raúl Castro explained the reasons for the visit and briefed on the contents of the talks. He underlined that the aggression on the part of the FNLA and of Mobutu to the MPLA and the possible development of future actions until independence in the month of November was taken into account and the awareness that "the reactionaries and the imperialists would try all possible methods to avoid having the forces of the MPLA take power". The same day Argüelles proposed a 94-man mission to Castro.[70] On 15 August, Castro urged the USSR to increase support for the MPLA, offered to send special troops and asked for assistance. The Russians declined.[71]

In view of the Zairian invasion in the north and the South African occupation of Ruacana-Calueque hydro-electric complex in the south, it was decided to staff the CIRs with almost 500 Cubans instead of the requested 100, which were to form about 4,800 FAPLA recruits into 16 infantry battalions, 25 mortar batteries and various anti-aircraft units in three to six months. These 500 men included 17 in a medical brigade and 284 officers.[56][70][72] "The decision to expand the operation reflected a feeling in Havana that ... there had to be enough of them to fulfill their mission as well as defend themselves in the event the operation went awry. It was nevertheless clear that ...they expected it (the mission) to be short term and to last around 6 months".[73]

The dispatch of the Cuban volunteers started 21 August and an advance party with the most urgently needed specialists used international commercial flights. Small groups continued to trickle into Luanda on such flights as well as on Cuba's aging Britannia planes and the bulk arrived after a two-week trip aboard three Cuban cargo vessels; the first one, the "Vietnam Heroico" docked at Porto Amboim on 5 October.[66] The arrival of two Cuban ships in Angola with instructors on board was reported by the CIA[74] and raised no alarm in Washington.[75] The CIRs were placed in Cabinda, Benguela, Saurimo (formerly Henrique de Carvalho) and at N'Dalatando (formerly Salazar). The CIR in Cabinda accounted for almost half of the total, 191 men, while the others had 66 or 67 each. Some were posted in headquarters in Luanda or in other places throughout the country. The reason for the stronger detachment in Cabinda was the perceived threat from

Zaire either to Cabinda or to the Congo.[66][76] By the time the training centres were fully staffed and operational on 18–20 October, unnoticed by the world, Operation Savannah was already in full swing.[77]

=====START BOX=====

Fidel Castro kept himself informed of the minutest details of the war. He personally saw off every ship bound for Angola, having previously addressed the fighting units in the La Cabana theatre; he himself sought out the commanders of the special forces battalion who went on the first flight and drove them in his own Soviet jeep right to the aircraft stairs ... By then, there was not a single dot on the map of Angola that he was unable to identify, nor any feature of the land that he did not know by heart. His absorption in the war was so intense and meticulous that he could quote any statistic relating to Angola as if it were Cuba itself, and he spoke of its towns, customs and peoples as if he had lived there all his life. In the early stages of the war, when the situation was urgent, Fidel Castro would spend up to 14 hours at a stretch in the command room of the general staff, at times without eating or sleeping, as if he were on the battlefield himself. He followed the course of battles with pins on minutely detailed wall-sized maps, keeping in constant touch with the MPLA high command on a battlefield where the time was six hours later.

(Note by:) Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Nobel prize-winning novelist and close friend of Fidel Castro [8])

=====END BOX=====

In contrast to the successes in the south, where by mid October the MPLA had gained control of 12 of Angola's provinces and most urban centres, they only barely managed to keep the well equipped FNLA and its allies abreast on the northern front just east of Luanda.[78] The FNLA was receiving arms and equipment from the U.S. via Zaire starting in the end of July [79] and had been strengthened in September by the arrival of the Fourth and Seventh Zairian Commando Battalions.[56] From July to November the front moved back and forth between Caxito and Quifangondo (Kifangondo). Netu asked the Soviet Union for more support which had no intention to send any staff before independence and only reluctantly sent more arms. The Cubans were busy dealing with the arrival of the contingents for the CIRs and it was only on 19 October that they paid sufficient attention to Luanda's precarious position. Realizing the threat they shut down the CIR at Salazar only 3 days after it started operating and deployed most of the recruits and Cuban instructors in Luanda.[80] Forty instructors from the CIR Salazar were the first Cubans to become involved in the defence of Quifangondo on 23 October 1975 when they launched an unsuccessful assault on the FNLA-Zairian forces at Morro do Cal. A second group supported the MPLA on 28 October along the same defence line to the east of Kifangondo.[81]

Yet unnoticed by the Cubans, the territory the MPLA had just gained in the south was quickly lost to the South African advances. After South African advisors and antitank weapons had helped to stop an MPLA advance on Nova Lisboa (Huambo) in early October Zul took Rocadas by Oct. 20, Sa da Bandeira by 24 and Mocamedes by 28

October. On 2–3 November, Cuban instructors for the third time got involved in the fighting, this time 51 men from the CIR Benguela, when they unsuccessfully tried to help the FAPLA stop the Zulu advance near Catengue. This first encounter between Cubans and South Africans also led to the first officially recognized Cuban fatalities. "Their participation led Zulu-Commander Breytenbach to conclude that his troops were 'facing the best organized and heaviest FAPLA opposition to date'".[82]

(...)

Cuba's first intervention -- Operation Carlota

It was only after the MPLA debacle at Catengue that the Cubans became fully aware of the South African invasion, that Luanda would be taken and that their training missions were in grave danger unless they took immediate action. Neto had requested immediate and massive reinforcements from Havana at the urging of Argüelles. On 4 November Castro decided to launch an intervention on an unprecedented scale code naming the mission "Operation Carlota" after 'Black Carlota', the leader of a slave rebellion in 1843. The same day, a first plane with 100 heavy weapon specialists, which the MPLA had requested in September, left for Brazzaville, arriving in Luanda on 7 November. On November 9 the first two Cuban planes arrived in Luanda with the first 100 men of a contingent of a 652-strong battalion of elite Special Forces.[83] The first priority of the Cubans was helping the MPLA to keep hold of Luanda. Fidel Castro explained the Cuban intervention: "When the invasion of Angola by regular South African troops started 23 October, we could not sit idle. And when the MPLA asked us for help, we offered the necessary aid to prevent Apartheid from making itself comfortable in Angola".[4] see also:[71]

With Operation Carlota Cuba became a major player in the conflict. Unlike its foreign engagements in the sixties this was no secret operation. Castro decided to support Angola in all openness, sending special forces and 35,000 infantry by the end of 1976, deploying them at Cuba's own expense and with its own means from November 1975 to January 1976. As on its previous missions all personnel were volunteers and the call-up was extremely popular. Air transportation for quick deployments proved to be a major problem. Cuba only had three ageing medium-range Bristol Britannia turboprop planes not fit to make 9,000 km non-stop transatlantic crossings. Nevertheless, between 7 November and 9 December the Cubans managed to run 70 reinforcement flights to Luanda. Initially they were able to make stops in Barbados, the Azores or Newfoundland prompting pressure from Washington to deny Cuba landing rights. But moving take-offs to Cuba's easternmost airport, Holguin, taking as little weight as necessary and adding additional tanks, the planes were used for numerous runs across the ocean until the Soviets pitched in with long-distance jet planes.[4][84]

For the bulk of the troops and the equipment the Cubans commandeered all available ships in its merchant marine, the first three sailing from Havana on 8 November. They docked in Luanda on 27 and 29 November and 1 December bringing 1,253 troops and equipment. [85]

The deployment of troops was not pre-arranged with the USSR, as often reported and

depicted by the US-administration. On the contrary, it also took the USSR by surprise.[86] The Soviets were forced to accept the Cuban troop deployment so as not to endanger relations with their most important ally in close proximity to the United States. But they had in mind to keep a lid on the extent of the Cuban engagement and merely sent arms and a few specialists to Brazzaville and Dar-es-Salaam. It was only two months later after the fighting swung in favour of the Cubans and the US passed the Clark Amendment that Moscow agreed to a degree of support by arranging for a maximum of 10 transport flights from Cuba to Angola.[87]

(...)

The northern front and Cabinda

The invasion of Cabinda was conducted by three FLEC and one Zairian infantry battalions under the command of 150 French and American mercenaries. The MPLA's had the 232 Cubans of the CIR, a freshly trained and an untrained FAPLA infantry battalion at its disposal. In the ensuing battle for Cabinda from 8 – 13 November they managed to repel the invasion without support from Operation Carlota, thus saving the exclave (*enclave*) for Angola.[89]

(...)

Cuba operated independently through December and January bringing in their troops slowly, but steadily. Two months after the start of Operation Carlota the Soviets agreed to ten charter flights on long-range IL-62 jet airliners, starting on 8 January.[98] This was followed one week later by an agreement that "the Soviets would supply all future weaponry ... transporting it directly to Angola so that the Cuban airlift could concentrate on personnel." [97] By early February, with increasing numbers in Cuban troops and sophisticated weaponry, the tide changed in favour of the MPLA. The final offensive in the North started on 1 January 1976. By 3 January FAPLA-Cuban forces took the FNLA airbases of Negage and Camabatela and a day later the FNLA capital of Carmona. A last ditch attempt by FNLA to use foreign mercenaries enlisted by the CIA (see next chapter: US response) failed; on 11 January FAPLA-Cubans captured Ambriz and Ambrizete (N'zeto) and on 15 February the FNLA's last foothold, Sao Salvador. By late February one Cuban and 12 FAPLA battalions had completely annihilated the FNLA, driving what was left of them and the Zairian army across the border.[99][100]

The South African contingent on the northern front had already been evacuated by ship on 28 November.[101] The last mercenaries left northern Angola by 17 January.[102]

US response

It was several days before the US realised the severity of the FNLA defeat at Quifangondo, but even then had little idea of the extent of the Cuban involvement. The news from the southern front was, in their view, still positive.[103] Kissinger, like the South Africans, was shaken by the scale of the Soviet and Cuban response. The CIA's Angolan task force at CIA headquarters at Langley had been so confident of success by the Zairian and South African regulars, that on 11 November the members had celebrated Angolan independence with wine and cheese in their crepe paper decorated offices.[23] The US had not commented on the South African invasion of Angola but denounced the

Cuban intervention when it first acknowledged Cuban troops in Angola in an official statement on 24 November 1975. Kissinger said "that US efforts at rapprochement with Cuba would end should 'Cuban armed intervention in the affairs of other nations struggling to decide their own fate' continue." [59] On 28 February 1976, Ford called Castro "an international outlaw" and the Cuban intervention a "flagrant act of aggression".[104]

Due to the hostility between the USA and Cuba the Americans regarded such an air (*action*) by the Cubans as a defeat which could not be accepted.[105] The US assumed that the USSR was behind the Cuban interference.[4][106] On 9 December Ford asked the Soviets to suspend the airlift, still assuming it was a Soviet-run operation.[107] The Americans also depicted the motivations and timings of the Cubans differently: They claimed that South Africa had to intervene after Cuba sent troops in support of the MPLA and that the war in Angola was a major new challenge to US power by an expansionist Moscow newly confident following communist victories in the Vietnam War. Only years later it became clear to them, that the Cubans acted on their own behalf.[108]

Castro responded to the US reaction: "Why were they vexed? Why had they planned everything to take possession of Angola before November 11? Angola is a country rich in resources. In Cabinda there is lots of oil. Some imperialists wonder why we help the Angolans, which interests we have. They are used to thinking that one country helps another one only when it wants its oil, copper, diamonds or other resources. No, we are not after material interests and it is logical that this is not understood by the imperialist. They only know chauvinistic, nationalistic and selfish criteria. By helping the people of Angola we are fulfilling a fundamental duty of internationalism.[4]

(...)

It was only when the US administration asked Congress for US\$28 million for IAFEATURE that Congress really paid attention to the events in Angola. By then "the evidence of the South African invasion was overwhelming and the stench of US-collusion with Pretoria hung in the air. Worse, the growing numbers of Cuban troops had derailed the CIA's plans and the administration seemed at a loss what to do next." [110] The money was not approved and on 20 December 1975, the U.S. Senate passed an amendment banning covert assistance to anti-Communist forces and curtailing CIA involvement in Angola. Later that winter, an amendment to the foreign aid bill sponsored by Dick Clark extended the ban. (Clark Amendment) [111] The US administration resorted to other means of support for FNLA and UNITA of which one was raising mercenaries. The CIA initiated a covert program to recruit Brazilians and Europeans, mostly Portuguese and British, to fight in the north of Angola. Altogether they managed to enlist around 250 men, but by the time meaningful numbers arrived in January 1975 the campaign in the north was all but over.[112] Other ways of continued support for the FNLA and UNITA were through South Africa and other US client states such as Israel and Morocco.[113]

A report by Henry Kissinger of 13 January 1976 gives an insight into the activities and hostilities in Angola, inter alia:[114]. There follows an updated situation report based on classified sources.

A: Diplomatic:

(1) Two Cuban delegations were present in Addis Ababa. During the just concluded OAU meeting, one delegation, headed by Osmany Cienfuegos, PCC Official concerned with Africa and Middle East and member of the PCC Central Committee, visited the Congo, Nigeria, Uganda and Algeria prior to the OAU meeting. Another Cuban delegation was headed by Cuba's ambassador Ricardo Alarcon.

(2) In late December early January a MPLA delegation visited Jamaica, Guyana, Venezuela and Panama to obtain support for its cause. The delegation is still in the region.

B: Military:

(1) It is estimated that Cuba may now have as many as 9,000 troops in Angola, based on the number of Cuban airlifts and sea lifts which have presently transited Angola. Military assistance to the MPLA may have cost Cuba the equivalent of US dollars 30 million. This figure includes the value of the military equipment that Cuba has sent to Angola, the costs of transporting men and material, and the cost of maintaining troops in the field.

(2) Cuban troops bore the brunt of fighting in the MPLA offensive in the northern sector last week which resulted in MPLA capture of Uige (Carmona). The MPLA may be preparing for an offensive in the south, partially at the request of the SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization).

(3) Eight Soviet fighters, probably MiG-17s, are reported being assembled in Luanda. These fighters arrived from an unknown source at the end of December. Eight MiGs, type unknown, are expected to be sent to Angola from Nigeria, numerous Cuban pilots arrived during December. The pilots are operating many aircraft now available to the MPLA including a Fokker Friendship F-27. The Cubans will operate the MiGs.

(4) Cuban troops are in complete control of Luanda by January 9. They are conducting all security patrols, operating police checkpoints, and will apparently soon assume control of Luanda's airport complex.

(5) Cuba may have begun to use 200 passenger capacity IL-62 aircraft (Soviet) in its airlift support operations. The IL-62 has double the capacity of Bristol Britannias and IL-18 which Cuba has previously employed and has a longer range as well. IL-62 left Havana for Luanda Jan. 10. and Jan. 11. All Portuguese commercial flights now landing at Luanda carry as much food as possible. Food supplies available to the general population have become tight.

"US intelligence estimated that by December 20 there were 5,000 to 6,000 Cubans in Angola." [115]

"Cuban sources, however, indicate that the number hovered around 3,500 to 4,000." [116] This more or less would have put the Cubans at par with the South Africans on the southern front. Gabriel García Márquez wrote that Kissinger remarked to Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez: 'Our intelligence services have grown so bad that we only found out that Cubans were being sent to Angola after they were already there.' At that moment, there were many Cuban troops, military specialists and civilian technicians in Angola — more even than Kissinger imagined. Indeed, there were so many ships anchored in the bay of Luanda that by February 1976 Neto said to a functionary close to

him: 'It's not right', if they go on like that, the Cubans will ruin themselves.' It is unlikely that even the Cubans had foreseen that their solidarity aid to the Angolan people would reach such proportions. It had been clear to them right from the start, however, that the action had to be swift, decisive, and at all costs successful.[117] But one result of the events in Angola in 1976 was the American's heightened attention to African affairs, especially in the south of the continent. Kissinger worried, "if the Cubans are involved there, Namibia is next and after that South Africa itself." With the need to distance themselves from outcasts in the eyes of black Africa this also meant the US would drop support for the white regime in Rhodesia, a price it was willing to pay to "thwart communism".[118][119]

The southern front: The SADF advance is stopped

By the time FAPLA and the Cubans were able to turn more attention to the southern front after the battle of Quifangondo, the South Africans had gained considerable ground (...)

(...)

Zulu now faced stronger resistance advancing on Novo Redondo after which fortunes changed in favour of the FAPLA and the Cubans. The first Cuban reinforcements arrived in Porto Amboim, only a few km north of Novo Redondo, quickly destroying three bridges crossing the Queve river, effectively stopping the South African advance along the coast on 13 November 1975.[125] Despite concerted efforts to advance north to Novo Redondo, the SADF was unable to break through FAPLA defences.[126][127][128] In a last successful advance a South African task force and UNITA troops took Luso on the Benguela railway on 11 December which they held until 27 December.[129]

By mid-December South Africa extended military service and called in reserves.[130][131] "An indication of the seriousness of the situation is that one of the most extensive military call-ups in South African history is now taking place".[132] By late December Cuba had deployed 3,500 to 4,000 troops in Angola, of which 1,000 were securing Cabinda [121] and eventually the tide turned in favour of the MPLA. [59] Apart from being "bogged down" on the southern front,[133] South Africa had to deal with two other major setbacks: the international press taking note of the operation and the shift in US policies.

South Africa withdraws

In light of these developments Pretoria had to decide whether it would stay in the game and bring in more troops. In late December 1975, there were heated debates between Vorster, foreign minister Muller, defence minister Botha, head of BOSS (South African Bureau of State Security) van den Bergh and a number of senior officials as to withdraw or to stay. Zaire, UNITA and the US urged South Africa to stay. But the US would not openly endorse the South African invasion and assure continuing military assistance in case of an escalation. On 30 December Vorster planned to withdraw after the OAU emergency session in Addis Ababa on 13 January to a line 50 to 80 km north of the Namibian border.[134] "In military terms the advance had come to a halt anyway, as all

attempts by Battle-Groups Orange and X-Ray to extend the war into the interior had been forced to turn back by destroyed bridges." [135] In early January 1976 the Cubans launched a first counter-offensive driving Foxbat from the Tongo and Medunda hills.[136] The OAU meeting which the South Africans had hopes for finally debated the Angola issue and voted on 23 January 1976, condemning the South African invasion and demand its withdrawal.[137] Sobered by the Cuban's performance and by the West's cold shoulder, Pretoria chose to fold and ordered the retreat of its troops from Angola.[138][139]

The sentiment of the Pretoria government at the time was expressed in a speech by Botha before South African parliament on 17 April 1978, in which he charged the US with "defaulting on a promise to give them all necessary support in their campaign to defeat the MPLA" [104] : "Against which neighbouring states have we taken aggressive steps? I know of only one occasion in recent years, when we crossed a border and that was in the case of Angola when we did so with the approval and knowledge of the Americans. But they left us in the lurch. We are going to retell that story: the story must be told and how we, with their knowledge, went in there and operated in Angola with their knowledge, how they encouraged us to act and, when we had nearly reached the climax, we were ruthlessly left in the lurch".[140]

Once the decision was made, South Africa rapidly withdrew its forces towards Namibia. In late January, the SADF abandoned the towns of Cela and Novo Redondo [141] Apart from a few skirmishes the Cubans stayed well behind the retreating South Africans and easily overcoming the remaining UNITA resistance. (...)

Consolidation

With the withdrawal of South Africa, FNLA and UNITA resistance crumbled and the MPLA was left in sole possession of power.[104] With the help of its Cuban allies the MPLA "not only vanquished its bitterest rivals – the FNLA and UNITA – but in the process had seen off the CIA and humbled the mighty Pretoria war machine." [142] Whatever remained of UNITA retreated into the Angolan bush and Zaire. African countries publicly discredited UNITA for its links with the apartheid regime, the CIA and white mercenaries. "Savimbi's political career appeared to be over. But he was saved by the cold war and his usefulness to the US and South Africa".[146]

The United Nations Security Council met to consider "the act of aggression committed by South Africa against the People's Republic of Angola" and on 31 March 1976, branded South Africa the aggressor, demanding it compensate Angola for war damages. Internationally South Africa found itself completely isolated and the failure of its Operation Savannah left it "without a single crumb of comfort".[147] "The internal repercussions of the Angolan debacle were felt quickly when, on 16 June 1976 – emboldened by the FAPLA-Cuban victory – the Soweto Uprising began, inaugurating a period of civil unrest which was to continue up until and beyond the collapse of apartheid." [147] Another setback for Pretoria within four years was the end of white minority rule in Rhodesia as it emerged as the next independent black-ruled nation of Zimbabwe, completing the total geographic isolation of apartheid South Africa.

Angola obtained recognition by the OAU on 10 February 1976 and was soon recognized by the majority of the international community albeit not by the US.[144] The US was unable to prevent its admittance to the UN General Assembly as its 146th member.[148]

At the height of the deployment in 1976 Cuba had 36,000 military personnel stationed in Angola.[149] The FNLA had all but disappeared from the scene and what remained of UNITA was hiding in the bush or had receded to Zaire. At their meeting in Conakry on 14 March 1976, when victory was already assured, Castro and Neto decided that the Cubans would withdraw gradually, leaving behind for as long as necessary enough men to organize a strong, modern army, capable of guaranteeing Angola's future internal security and national independence without outside help. The Cubans had no intention to get bogged down in a lengthy internal counter-insurgency and started to reduce their presence in Angola as planned after the retreat of the South Africans. By the end of May, more than 3,000 troops had already returned to Cuba, and many more were on the way.[150] By the end of the year the Cuban troops had been reduced to 12,000.

The Cubans had high hopes that after their victory in Angola, in co-operation with the USSR, they could free all of southern Africa from the influence of the US and China.[151] In Angola, they put up dozens of training camps for Namibian (SWAPO), Rhodesian (ZAPU) and South African (ANC) guerrillas. An SADF intelligence report in 1977 conceded "that SWAPO's standard of training had improved significantly because of the training they had received from the Cuban instructors".[152] Cuba saw its second main task in training and equipping the Angolan army FAPLA which the Soviets generously supplied with sophisticated weapons including tanks and (*their*) own air force with MiG-21 fighters.

In early 1977, the new Carter administration had in mind to recognize the MPLA-government despite of the presence of Cuban troops assuming they would be withdrawn once the Namibian issue was settled and the southern border of Angola was secure. They acknowledged Cuba's role in Angola when, on 25 January, UN ambassador Andrew Young said: There is a sense in which the Cubans bring a certain stability and order to Angola.[153]

On the international stage Cuba's victory against the 'forces of imperialism' boosted Castro's image as one of the top leaders in the Non-Aligned Movement of which he was secretary-general from 1979 to 1983.[154] Although with Cuba's help the MPLA-government became firmly established Cuban attempts to hand over the defence of the country failed and it soon became drawn into Angola's counterinsurgency war against UNITA.

Humanitarian engagement

According to the Cubans the overriding priority of their mission in Angola was humanitarian, not military. In the wake of Operation Carlota, around 5,000 Cuban technical, medical and educational staff were constantly posted in Angola to fill the gaps the Portuguese had left behind. "For a generation of Cubans, internationalist service in Angola represented the highest ideal of the Cuban Revolution" and for many it became a normal part of life to volunteer for an internationalist mission, principally in Angola,

which lasted 18 to 24 months. In the following years tens of thousands of volunteers were processed each year.[155] By 1978 Angola's health system was almost completely run by Cuban doctors.

After the Portuguese left the country there was only one doctor per 100,000 inhabitants. The Cubans posted a large medical team at Luanda's University and Prenda hospitals and opened clinics in remote areas all across Angola. At the time of independence over 90% of the Angolan population was illiterate. Starting in June 1977 an educational programme began to take shape. 2,000 students were granted scholarships in Cuba and by 1987 there were 4,000 Angolan students studying on the "Isla de la Juventud" (Isle of Youth) (*off Cuba's Southwest coast – ed.*) In March 1978 the first Cuban 732-strong secondary school teacher brigade (Destacamento Pedagógico Internacionalista) took up its work in Angola. These were later joined by 500 primary school teachers and 60 professors at Luanda's university. Through the 1980s the level was constantly held at about 2,000 teachers of all levels. The technical programme was the largest branch of Cuba's humanitarian mission as Angola was desperate for technicians to oversee the reconstruction projects. Cuban engineers, technicians and construction workers worked on construction sites, especially repairing the badly damaged infrastructure (bridges, roads, buildings, telecommunication etc.) of the country. The first teams arrived in January 1977 and in the following 5 years they built 2,000 houses in Luanda and 50 new bridges, reopened several thousand km of road, electricity and telephone networks.

Attempts to revive Angolan coffee and sugar cane production soon failed due to the spread of UNITA violence. According to Cuba tecnica, the government office for non-military foreign assistance, there were more Cuban volunteers than could be accepted and long waiting lists.[156] Cuba's engagement laid the foundations for Angola's social services.[157]

Proxy War, UN Resolutions and Negotiations (late 1970s and 1980s)

In the following years, Cuba kept itself engaged in a number of other African countries. In 1978, Cuba sent 16,000 troops to the Ethiopia Ogaden War, but this time in close coordination with the Soviets. Smaller military missions were active in the Congo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Benin. Cuban technical, educational and medical staff in the tens of thousands were working in even more countries: Algeria (Tindouf), Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Ethiopia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Tanzania, the Congo and Benin. Up to 18,000 students from these countries studied on full Cuban scholarships per year on the island.[156][158]

Towards the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s, Angola slipped away from wider international public attention but despite Cuba's overwhelming victory on the ground, the war in Angola was far from over. UNITA was able to take up its insurgency operations in the south because of military and logistical support from South Africa, and the Angolan government still had not gained control over the whole country. While the vast majority of the Cuban troops remaining in Angola stayed in the bases, some of them helped in 'mopping-up' operations, clearing remaining pockets of resistance in Cabinda and in the north. The operations in the south were less successful because of "Savimbi's tenacity and determination to fight on".[159] "Most of the Cubans were organized and deployed in

motorized infantry, air defense, and artillery units. Their main missions were to deter and defend against attacks beyond the southern combat zone, protecting strategic and economically critical sites and facilities, and provide combat support, such as rear-area security for major military installations and Luanda itself. At least 2000 Cuban troops were stationed in oil-producing Cabinda Province".[160] After the South African retreat. South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) again established bases in southern Angola, now supported by the Angolan government, and stepped up its operations in Namibia. In turn, as of early 1977, South African incursions into Angola were on the increase.[152]

Cuban forces soon again were increased due to tensions between Angola and Zaire in March 1977 (see Shaba I). Mobutu accused Angola of instigating and supporting an attack of the FNLC (Front National pour la Libération du Congo) on the Zairian province of Shaba and Neto charged Mobutu with harbouring and supporting the FNLA and FLEC. Only 2 months later the Cubans played a role in stabilizing the Neto government and foiling the Nitista Plot when Nito Alves and José van Dunem split from the government and led an uprising. While Cuban soldiers actively helped Neto put down the coup, Alves and Neto both believed the Soviet Union supported Neto's ouster, which is another indication of the mutual distrust between the Soviets and Neto as well as the differing interests between the Soviets and the Cubans.[161][162] Raúl Castro sent an additional four thousand troops to prevent further dissension within the MPLA's ranks and met with Neto in August in a display of solidarity. In contrast, Neto's distrust in the Soviet leadership increased and relations with the USSR worsened.[163]

The first large scale incursions by the SADF (*South African Air Force*) occurred in May 1978 (Operation Reindeer), which became South Africa's most controversial operation in Angola.[168] It involved two simultaneous assaults on heavily populated SWAPO camps at Cassinga (Kassinga) and Chetequera. SADF intelligence believed Cassinga to be a PLAN* camp (*People's Liberation Army of Namibia, the armed wing of SWAPO). The operational order was "to inflict maximum losses", but where possible, to "capture leaders".[169] In the air borne raid on 8 May 1978 (SADF-terminology: Battle of Cassinga) over 600 people were killed, including some women and children. In addition, up to 150 Cubans of a unit rushing to the camp's aid lost their lives in an air attack and ambush on the way from their garrison in Tchamutete 15 km to the south.[170] Thus, Cuba suffered its highest single-day casualty of its Angolan intervention. According to the controversial findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the camp most likely served civilian as well as a military purposes and the raid constituted a breach of international law and the "commission of gross human rights violations".[169] SWAPO and the international media branded the incident a massacre turning it into a political disaster for South Africa. The revulsion at the carnage of the "Cassinga raid" and the ensuing international outcry led to the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 435 on 29 September 1978, calling for Namibia's independence and, to that end, for the establishment of a "Transition Assistance Group".[7][171] Pretoria signed the resolution which spelled out the steps for granting independence to Namibia and raised expectations "that peace was around the corner in Southern Africa".[172]

(...)

In the early 1980s, the United States, in their endeavour to get the USSR and Cuba out of Angola, became directly involved in negotiations with Angola. Angola pointed out it could safely reduce the number of Cuban troops and Soviet advisers if it wasn't for the continuing South African incursions and threat at its southern border. The most obvious solution was an independent Namibia which South Africa had to give up. After having to accept a leftist regime in Angola, Pretoria was reluctant to relinquish control of Namibia because of the possibility that the first elections would bring its "traditional nemesis", SWAPO, to power. It continued to attend negotiating sessions of the Contact Group throughout the early 1980s, always prepared to bargain but never ready to settle.[164] Cuba, not involved in the negotiations, basically agreed to such a solution paving the way to Namibia's freedom. Yet, towards the end of Reagan's second term in office, the negotiations had not born any fruit.[4]

After the UN-sponsored talks on the future of Namibia failed in January 1981, (South Africa walked out of the Pre-Implementation Conference in Geneva on 13 January [113]) in April 1981 the new American Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Chester Crocker, took up negotiations combining "constructive engagement with South Africa" with the "linkage" proposal (independence for Namibia in exchange for Cuba's withdrawal). Both Angola and South Africa deeply distrusted the US for various reasons and the idea was rejected. It continued to be the basis of further negotiations; yet, the Contact Group members as well as the "front line states" (states bordering South Africa) were opposed to linking Namibian independence with Cuban withdrawal.[177] Despite its overwhelming presence in Angola, the Cubans remained uninvited to the negotiations.[178]

(...)

In a joint statement on 19 March 1984 Cuba and Angola announced the principles on which a Cuban withdrawal would be negotiated: unilateral withdrawal of the SADF, implementation of Resolution 435 and cessation of support for UNITA and aggression against Angola. Cuban withdrawal would be a matter between Cuba and Angola. In a similar joint announcement in 1982 these principles had been formulated as demands. The proposal was rejected by Botha.[184] In September 1984 Angola presented a plan calling for the retreat of all Cubans to positions north of the 13th parallel and then to the 16th parallel, again on the condition that South Africa pulled out of Namibia and respected Resolution 435.

10.000 Cuban troops around the capital and in Cabinda were to remain. A major obstacle in then negotiations was the timeline for the withdrawal of Cuban troops. While Pretoria demanded a maximum of 7 months the Cubans wanted four years. Crocker managed to reduce the Cuban's timeline to two years upon which the South Africans suggested only 12 weeks. Crocker then proposed a timeline of 2 years and a withdrawal in stages and a maximum of 6,000 troops remaining up to another year in the north. But both parties and UNITA rejected this proposal and the negotiations stalled. Relations were additionally strained when South African police shot 19 blacks on 21 March 1985 marching on the 25th anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre. On 17 April Pretoria installed an 'Interim Government' in Namibia which was in direct contravention of Resolution 435.[185] The Lusaka Accord completely fell apart when South Africa broke the cease-fire. On 20 May 1985 it sent a commando team to blow up an American-run Gulf Oil facility in northern

Angola. The raid failed but it showed that Pretoria was "not interested in a cease-fire agreement or the Namibian settlement to which a cease-fire was supposed to lead." [186]

On 10 July 1985 the US Congress rescinded the 10-year-old Clark Amendment giving the final blow to the peace process. Within a year at least seven bills and resolutions followed urging aid to UNITA, including overt military support and some 15 million US dollars. As of 1986 the US openly supported UNITA.[50][187] By 1986 the war reached a stalemate: FAPLA was unable to uproot UNITA in its tribal stronghold and UNITA was no serious threat to the government in Luanda.[188] Within a week Pretoria, suffering from internal unrest and international sanctions, declared a State of Emergency.[189]

Cuba's second intervention -- Escalation of the conflict

As a result of the South African Operation Askari in December 1983, which targeted PLAN bases inside Angola, the USSR not only increased its aid to Angola but also took over the tactical and strategic leadership of FAPLA deploying advisers right down to the battalion level[190] and begun planning a large-scale offensive against the UNITA-stronghold in southeastern Angola.

Soviet command did not include the Cuban forces in Angola.[191] Cuba's strategic opinions differed considerably from those of the Soviets and Angolans and Cuba strongly advised against an offensive in the southeast because it would create the opportunity for a significant South African invasion, which is what transpired.[4] A FAPLA-offensive in 1984 had already brought dismal results. Under Soviet leadership the FAPLA launched two more offensives in 1985 and 1986. The Cubans deny involvement in the 1985 operation but supported the offensive in 1986 despite of many reservations, not providing ground forces but technical and air support. Apart from taking Cazombo in 1985, coming close to Mavinga and bringing UNITA close to defeat, both offensives ended up in a complete failure and became a major embarrassment for the Soviets. Unlike the Cubans with ten years of experience in the African theatre, the Soviet leadership was inexperienced and relations between the two became strained.

In addition, in March 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev had become the new General Secretary with whom Castro had considerable disagreements. In both FAPLA-offensives South Africa, still controlling the lower reaches of southwestern Angola, intervened as soon as UNITA came into distress. In September 1985, the South African Air Force prevented the fall of Mavinga and the FAPLA-offensive ended at the Lomba River.[190]

After this debacle in 1985, the Soviets sent more equipment and advisors to Angola and immediately went about to prepare another FAPLA-offensive in the following year. In the meantime UNITA received its first military aid from the US, which included surface-to-air Stinger missiles and BGM-71 TOW anti-tank-missiles. The US sent supplies to UNITA and SADF through the reactivated Kamina Airbase in Zaire. The offensive starting in May 1986 already got off to a poor start and again with the help of the SADF UNITA managed to stop the advance by late August.[192]

The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale

Preparations went on their way for the next offensive in 1987, Operacao Saluando Outubro and once more the Soviets upgraded the FAPLA's equipment including 150 T-55 and T-62 tanks and Mi-24 helicopters. Again they dismissed warnings of a South African intervention. Pretoria, taking notice of the massive military build-up around Cuito Cuanavale, warned UNITA and on 15 June authorized covert support. In spite of these preparations, on 27 July Castro proposed Cuba's participation in the negotiations, indicating that he was interested in curtailing its involvement in Angola. The Reagan administration declined.[193]

(...)

Cuito Cuanavale, only a village, was important to FAPLA as a forward air base to patrol and defend southern Angola and considered an important gateway to UNITA's headquarters in the south-east. With the South Africans on the counter-attack, the town and base and possibly all of Cuando Cubango were now under threat, as was FAPLA's planned advance southwards against UNITA; on 15 November Luanda requested urgent military assistance from Cuba. Castro approved the Cuban intervention, Operation Maniobra XXXI Aniversario on the same day, retaking the initiative from the Soviets. As in 1975, Cuba again did not inform the USSR in advance of its decision to intervene.[195] For the second time Cuba dispatched a large contingent of troops and arms across the ocean: 15,000 troops and equipment, including tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft weapons and aircraft. Although not responsible for the dismal situation of the FAPLA Cuba felt impelled to intervene in order to prevent a total disaster for the Angolans. In Castro's view, a South African victory would have meant not only the capture of Cuito and the destruction of the best Angolan military formations, but, quite probably, the end of Angola's existence as an independent country. Around mid-January Castro let the Angolans know that he was taking charge and the first Cuban enforcements were deployed at Cuito Cuanavale.[196]

The Cuban's initial priority was saving Cuito Cuanavale, but while enforcements were arriving at the besieged garrison they made preparations for a second front in Lubango where the SADF had been operating unhindered for 8 years.[4][197][198]

By early November, the SADF had cornered FAPLA units in Cuito Cuanavale and was poised to destroy them.[199] On 25 November the UN Security Council demanded the SADF's unconditional withdrawal from Angola by 10 December, but the US ensured that there were no repercussions for South Africa. US Assistant Secretary for Africa Chester Crocker reassured Pretoria's ambassador: "The resolution did not contain a call for comprehensive sanctions, and did not provide for any assistance to Angola. That was no accident, but a consequence of our own efforts to keep the resolution within bounds." [200] Through December the situation for the besieged Angolans became critical as the SADF tightened the noose around Cuito Cuanavale. Observers expected it to fall into South African hands any time soon and UNITA prematurely announced the town had been taken.[6]

Starting 21 December the South Africans planned the final operation to "pick off" the five FAPLA brigades which were still to the east of the Cuito river "before moving in to occupy the town if the conditions were favourable".[201] From mid-January to the end of

February the SADF launched six major assaults on FAPLA positions east of the Cuito river, none of which delivered tangible results. Although the first attack on 13 January 1988 was successful, spelling near disaster for a FAPLA brigade, the SADF was unable to continue and retreated to its starting positions. After a month the SADF was ready for the second assault on 14 February. Again it withdrew after successfully driving FAPLA-Cuban units off the Chaminga high ground. Narrowly escaping catastrophe, the FAPLA units east of the Cuito River withdrew to the Tumpo (river) triangle, a smaller area, ideally suited to defence. On 19 February the SADF suffered a first major setback when a third assault against a FAPLA battalion north of the Dala river was repelled; the SADF was unable to reach FAPLA's forward positions and had to withdraw.

In the following days the Cubans stepped up their air attacks against South African positions. On 25 February the FAPLA-Cubans repelled a fourth assault and the SADF had to retreat to their positions east of the Tumpo River. The failure of this attack "proved a turning point of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, boosting FAPLA's flagging morale and bringing the South African advance to a standstill." [202] A fifth attempt was beaten back on 29 February delivering the SADF a third consecutive defeat. After some more preparation the South Africans launched their last and fourth unsuccessful attack on 23 March. As SADF-Colonel Jan Breytenbach wrote, the South African assault "was brought to a grinding and definite halt" by the combined Cuban and Angolan forces.[50][197][199]

Eventually Cuban troop strength in Angola increased to about 55,000, with 40,000 deployed in the south. Due to the international arms embargo since 1977, South Africa's aging air force was outclassed by the sophisticated Soviet-supplied air defence system and air-strike capabilities fielded by the Angolans and it was unable to uphold the air supremacy it had enjoyed for years; its loss in turn proved to be critical to the outcome of the battle on the ground.[203]

Cuito Cuanavale was the major battle site between Cuban, Angolan, Namibian and South African forces. It was the biggest battle on African soil since World War II and in its course around 20,000 soldiers were killed. Cuban planes and 1,500 Cuban soldiers had reinforced the Angolans at Cuito. After the failed assault on 23 March 1988, the SADF withdrew leaving a 1,500-man "holding force" behind and securing their retreat with one of the most heavily mined areas in the world. Cuito Cuanavale continued to be bombarded from a distance of 30 to 40 km.[196][204]

The western front

In the meantime, on 10 March 1988, when the defence of Cuito Cuanavale after three failed SADF attacks was secure, Cuban, FAPLA and SWAPO units advanced from Lubango to the southwest.

The first South African resistance was encountered near Calueque on 15 March followed by three months of bloody clashes as the Cubans progressed towards the Namibian border. By the end of May Cuba had two divisions in southwestern Angola. By June they constructed two forward airbases at Cahama and Xangongo with which Cuban air power could be projected into Namibia. All of southern Angola was covered by a radar network

and SA-8 air defence ending South African air superiority.[205]

On 26 May 1988, the chief of the SADF announced, "heavily armed Cuban and SWAPO forces, integrated for the first time, have moved south within 60km of the Namibian border". The remaining SADF forces at Cuito Cuanavale were now in danger of being closed in. On 8 June 1988 the SADF called up 140,000 men of the reserves (Citizen Force), giving an indication of how serious the situation had become.[6] The South African administrator general in Namibia acknowledged on 26 June that Cuban MIG-23s were flying over Namibia, a dramatic reversal from earlier times when the skies had belonged to the SAAF. He added, "the presence of the Cubans had caused a flutter of anxiety" in South Africa.[199]

In June 1988 the Cubans prepared to advance on Calueque starting from Xangongo and Tchipa. In case of serious South African counter attacks, Castro gave orders to be ready to destroy the Ruacana reservoirs and transformers and attack South African bases in Namibia. The offensive started from Xangongo on June 24 immediately clashing with the SADF en route to Cuamato. Although the SADF was driven off the FAPLA-Cubans retreated to their base. On 26 July 1989 the SADF shelled Tchipa (Techipa) with long-range artillery and Castro gave orders for the immediate advance on Calueque and an air strike against the SADF camps and military installations around Calueque. After a clash with a FAPLA-Cuban advance group on 27 June the SADF retreated towards Calueque under bombardment from Cuban planes and crossed the border into Namibia that same afternoon. By then, Cuban MiG-23s had carried out the attacks on the SADF positions around the Calueque dam, 11 km north of the Namibian border, also damaging the bridge and hydroelectric installations.[196] The major force of the Cubans, still on the way, never saw action and returned to Tchipa and with the retreat of the SADF into Namibia and on 27 June the hostilities ceased.[206]

The CIA reported that "Cuba's successful use of air power and the apparent weakness of Pretoria's air defences" highlighted the fact that Havana had achieved air superiority in southern Angola and northern Namibia. Only a few hours after the Cuban's air strike, the SADF destroyed the nearby bridge over the Cunene River. They did so, the CIA surmised, "to deny Cuban and Angolan ground forces easy passage to the Namibia border and to reduce the number of positions they must defend." [207] The South Africans, impressed by the suddenness and scale of the Cuban advance and believing that a major battle "involved serious risks" withdrew.[208] Five days later Pretoria ordered a combat group still operational in southeastern Angola to scale back to avoid any more casualties, effectively withdrawing from all fighting, and a SADF division was deployed in defence of Namibia's northern border.[209]

Cuba and the Three Powers Accord (The New York Accords)

The negotiations and accords until 1988 had all been bilateral, either between Angola and the US, Angola and South Africa or the US and South Africa. Luanda refused any direct contact with UNITA, instead looking for direct talks with Savimbi's sponsors in Pretoria and Washington. The negotiations usually took place in third countries and mediated by third countries. The US, although clandestinely supporting the UNITA, often acted as a mediator itself. From 1986 the Soviet Union expressed its interest in a political solution.

It was increasingly included in consultations but never directly involved in the negotiations. Endeavours for a settlement had intensified after the fighting in southern Angola broke out in 1987. It was agreed, that this time only governments were to take part in the negotiations, which excluded participation by UNITA.

From the start of the negotiations in 1981 the Cubans had not asked and were not asked to participate and the Americans did not have in mind to include them. Castro signalled interest to the US in July 1987 while preparations for the FAPLA offensive against UNITA were under way. He let the Americans know that negotiations including the Cubans would be much more promising. But it was not until January 1988 that US secretary of state George Schultz authorized the American delegation to hold direct talks with the Cubans with the strict provision that they only discuss matters of Angola and Namibia but not the US-embargo against Cuba.[4] The Cuban government joined negotiations on 28 January 1988. They conceded that their withdrawal had to include all troops in Angola including the 5,000 they had in mind to keep in the north and in Cabinda for protection of the oil fields. Yet, US support for UNITA was going to be continued and was not to be an issue at the discussions.[210]

The US continued its two-track policy, mediating between Luanda and Pretoria as well as providing aid to UNITA through Kamina airbase in Zaire.[211] The Reagan administration's first priority was to get the Cubans out of Angola. In its terminology, by supporting UNITA the US was conducting "low-intensity warfare". According to a western diplomat in Luanda, the US "first wanted to get the Cubans out and afterwards wanted to ask the South Africans to kindly retreat from Namibia".[50] David Albright reported that South African officials believe that Armscor's preparations for a nuclear test at Vastrap were discovered by Soviet or Western intelligence agencies, and that this discovery led to increased pressure on Cuba and the Soviet Union to withdraw from Angola.[212]

Crocker had initially been unable to convince anyone in Europe of his linkage concept, which tied Namibian independence to Cuban withdrawal. On the contrary, the European Union was ready to help with Angolan reconstruction.[citation needed]

(...)

In July 1987 Cuba and Angola had offered to speed up Cuban withdrawal. 20,000 troops stationed south of the 13th parallel could be sent home within two instead of three years on the condition that the SADF retreated from Angola, that US and South African support for UNITA was terminated, that Angola's sovereignty was respected and UN Resolution 435 was implemented. Botha flatly rejected any move before the Cubans withdrew from Angola. In order to "torpedo" the initiatives Malan "innocently" suggested direct negotiations with Moscow so that the Angola conflict could be solved after the example of Afghanistan. The Kremlin responded mockingly that Angola and Afghanistan hardly had more in common than the initial letters in their name.[50] Thus, the time frame of withdrawal remained the biggest obstacle for a settlement. Chester Crocker proposed a tighter time frame of total withdrawal within three years which the Angolans rejected.[213]

It was only after the battle at Cuito Cuanavale that the Botha government showed a real interest in peace negotiations.[156] The Cuban military strategy in southern Angola in

1988 brought urgency to the negotiations. After stopping the SADF counter offensive at Cuito Cuanavale and opening a second front to the west the Cubans in Angola had raised the stakes and reversed the situation on the ground. In fact, the US wondered whether the Cubans would stop their advance at the Namibian border.[214] The heavy loss of life at Calueque sparked outrage in South Africa and it ordered an immediate retrenchment. The SADF forces remaining in eastern Angola were instructed to avoid further casualties. After the bloody clashes on 27 June the SADF on 13 July set up 10 Division in defence of northern Namibia, in case the Cubans attempted an invasion.[209] Thus, Jorge Risquet, head of the Cuban delegation, responded to South African demands: "The time for your military adventures, for the acts of aggression that you have pursued with impunity, for your massacres of refugees ... is over... South Africa is acting as though it was a victorious army, rather than what it really is: a defeated aggressor that is withdrawing ... South Africa must face the fact that it will not obtain at the negotiating table what it could not achieve on the battlefield." [4][215] Crocker cabled Secretary of State George Shultz that the talks had taken place "against the backdrop of increasing military tension surrounding the large build-up of heavily armed Cuban troops in southwest Angola in close proximity to the Namibian border ... The Cuban build-up in southwest Angola has created an unpredictable military dynamic." [216]

The Cubans were the driving force behind the negotiations in the final phase beginning in July 1988. The Angolan allies, first wanting to maintain the status quo after the successes in the south, had to be persuaded to continue, worried that the fighting in Cunene escalate into an all-out war. Crocker achieved a first breakthrough in New York on 13 July. The Cubans replaced Jorge Risquet by more conciliatory Carlos Aldana Escalante and agreed in general to withdraw from Angola in turn for Namibian independence. Cuba's calculations were simple: Once the South Africans were out of Namibia and Resolution 435 was implemented, Pretoria would be without a safe base to operate from and to destabilize Angola. The Luanda government could hold off UNITA without Cuban help. Cuba also figured that SWAPO, their regional ally, would pipe the tune in Namibia.[156]

In the "New York Principles" the parties agreed to settle their differences through negotiations. The following round of talks in Cape Verde, 22 – 23 July 1988, only produced a commitment to set up a Joint Monitoring Commission which was to oversee the withdrawals. On 5 August the three parties signed the "Geneva Protocol" laying out South African withdrawal from Angola starting 10 August and to be completed 1 September. By then Cubans and Angolans were to agree on Cuban troop withdrawal. On 10 September a tripartite peace settlement was to be signed and Resolution 435 was to be implemented on 1 November.[217] A ceasefire came into effect on 8 August 1988.[218] Pretoria pulled its remaining forces out of Angola by 30 August 1988. Cuban and SWAPO forces moved away from the southern border. By then a formula for the Cuban withdrawal from Angola had not been found as there was still a gap of 41 months between the Cuban and South African proposal and it took another five rounds of talks between August and October 1988 to find a settlement. The negotiations were interrupted to await the outcome of the US elections in which George H. W. Bush succeeded Ronald Reagan on 8 November 1988. In the meantime a FAPLA offensive was under way and UNITA was close to collapse threatening another South African intervention and putting Cuban forces in Angola on alert. Yet, Pretoria did not have in mind to endanger the talks and refrained from interference.

It was only after the US elections that the parties agreed on a timetable for the Cubans. On 22 December 1988, one month before Reagan's second term ended, Angola, Cuba and South Africa signed the Three Powers Accord in New York, arranging for the withdrawal of South African troops from Angola and Namibia, the independence of Namibia and the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Cuba agreed to an overall time frame of 30 months and to withdraw within 27 months after implementation of Resolution 435. The timetable agreed upon provided for the following steps:

*until 1 April 1989: withdrawal of 3,000 Cuban troops (3 months)

*1 April 1989: Implementation of Resolution 435 and start of 27-month time frame for total withdrawal *1 August 1989: all Cuban troops moved north of 15th parallel (7 months)

*31 October 1989: all Cuban troops moved north of 13th parallel (10 months)

*1 November 1989: free elections in Namibia and 50% of all Cuban troops withdrawn from Angola

*1 April 1990: 66% of all Cuban troops withdrawn (15 months)

*1 October 1990: 76% of all Cuban troops withdrawn (21 months)

*1 July 1991: Cuban withdrawal completed (30 months)[219]

The accord ended 13 years of Cuban military presence in Angola which was finalized one month early on 25 May 1991. At the same time the Cubans removed their troops from Pointe Noire (Republic of the Congo) and Ethiopia.

Aftermath

Cuban intervention had a substantial impact on Southern Africa. As W. Freeman, ambassador, US state department, department for African policies, put it into words: "Castro could regard himself as father of Namibia's independence and as the one who put an end to colonialism in Africa. Indeed, Cuba demonstrated responsibility and maturity. This should have been acknowledged by the USA as an important gesture and merited a respective answer. But American politics concerning relations with Cuba are absolutely poisoned, hence Cuba, which had acted really responsibly, was denied the slightest appreciation it had deserved".[4]

At least Crocker had admitted when he cabled Shultz during the negotiations, on 25 August 1988:

"Reading the Cubans is yet another art form. They are prepared for both war and peace. We witness considerable tactical finesse and genuinely creative moves at the table. This occurs against the backdrop of Castro's grandiose bluster and his army's unprecedented projection of power on the ground."[220]

In a national ceremony on 7 December 1988, all Cubans killed in Africa were buried in cemeteries across the island. According to Cuban government figures, during all of the internationalist missions carried out in Africa from the early 1960s to the withdrawal of the last soldier from Angola on May 25, 1991, a total of 2,289 Cubans were killed. In the

years of Cuba's engagement 450,000 Cuban soldiers and development workers had been to Africa.

Free elections in Namibia were held in November 1989 with SWAPO taking 57% of the vote in spite of Pretoria's attempts to swing the elections in favour of other parties.[221][222] (see Martti Ahtisaari and History of Namibia). Namibia gained independence in March 1990.

The situation in Angola was anything but settled and the country continued to be ravaged by civil war for more than a decade. In spite of free elections, UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi would not accept the results and refused to join the Angolan parliament as opposition. Again UNITA took up arms, financed with the sale of blood diamonds. The civil war ended in 2002 after Jonas Savimbi was killed with the aid of mercenaries.[citation needed]

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(This page was last modified on 2 April 2011.)

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Note from the Dowson archives:

See also: NEW EDITIONs from Pathfinder Press (2016-2017)

“Cuba & Angola: fighting for Africa's Freedom and our own” --Fidel Castro, Raul Castro, Nelson Mandela, The Cuban Five in Angola in their own words,” 2016

“THE WAR FOR FREEDOM: Cuba & Angola? - 2017, by Harry Villegas “Pombo”

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